



The Iowa Review

Volume 10
Issue 3 *Summer*

Article 9

1979

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver

David Boxer

Cassandra Phillips

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boxer, David and Cassandra Phillips. "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver." *The Iowa Review* 10.3 (1979): 75-90. Web.
Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview/vol10/iss3/9>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver

David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips

AFTER GROWING UP in rural Oregon and Washington, Raymond Carver migrated to northern California, in the early sixties, to pursue higher education at Chico State College. There he was discovered by one of his teachers, who happened to be the writer John Gardner, himself fresh out of graduate school. Gardner knew that promising young writers need nurturing. Carver was soon using his mentor's campus office on weekends for his writing. But writing wasn't all he was doing there, as he confessed, with amusement and some chagrin, many years later: "In his office on the weekends I used to go through his manuscripts and steal titles from his stories . . . I mean take his titles, which struck me as awfully good, as I recall, and rephrase them, and put them on my own stories."¹ When Gardner caught on to what his young protegee was up to, Carver got a scolding, and was informed that the invasion of another writer's privacy and the pilfering of his words were basic improprieties.

This incident curiously resembles one of Carver's own best stories, "Neighbors," from the collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, a 1977 National Book Award nominee.² In the story, a young couple, Bill and Arlene Miller, are tending the plants and cat of their vacationing neighbors, Jim and Harriet Stone. The unglamorous Millers—he a bookkeeper, she a secretary—wistfully envy the "fuller and brighter life" of the peripatetic Stones. They find themselves drawn to the vacant apartment and further to the closets, cupboards and drawers of their neighbors. The different world across the hall comes to dominate the Millers' thoughts, and it ignites their sex life. Totemically, the Millers are shedding their own dull skins for the bright feathers of their neighbors.

Much as Carver himself poked through Gardner's papers, filching his teacher's titles, Bill Miller sips the Stones' Chivas Regal, nibbles at food left in the refrigerator, pockets a pill bottle from the medicine chest, and dresses himself in Harriet's as well as Jim's clothing. Carver, we may speculate, was trying on the identity of a teacher and writer whom he admired and wanted to be like. The Millers' experiment is similar, if more insidious.

This connection between life and art seems more than coincidental; through many of the stories of Raymond Carver is woven a double strand of voyeurism and dissociation. The term "voyeurism" is used advisedly here, to mean not just sexual spying, but the wistful identification with some distant, unattainable idea of self. Dissociation is a sense of disengagement from one's own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselfed. As his dissociated characters tentatively reach out toward otherness, Carver ambushes them, giving them sudden, hideously clear visions of the emptiness of their lives; even the most familiar takes on the sharp definition

of the strangely unfamiliar. They become voyeurs, then, of their own experience.

While it can't be said that each of the twenty-two stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (the very title suggests a backing off from involvement) incorporates voyeurism and dissociation, most contain elements of one, the other or both. Further, these ideas suggest a way of looking at Carver the artist, whose unique voice embodies the very cadences of anomie. His characters are the unemployed and the unhappily employed, laconic members of the non-upwardly mobile working and middle classes. Their marriages are without intimacy, their needs unexpressed, unrealized or sublimated into vague dreams of change for the better. They are the folks next door, familiar representatives of "the real America." Typically, Carver writes about characters whose lives are in suspended animation, verging on disarray: the salesman between jobs, the writer between stories, the student between semesters, the husband or wife between marriages, and the insomniac, caught between waking consciousness and the escape of sleep. Carver's chosen task is to convey through the most fitting language and symbols the special moments when these people have sudden, astonishing glimpses behind the curtain which separates their empty lives from chaos.

We see these dynamics at work in "Neighbors," whose ominous subtext is, at first, hidden behind Carver's ironic, deadpan style. There are, in fact, early clues that the Millers' idyll across the hall is leading them to a confrontation with unacknowledged regions of their own selves. On Bill Miller's first trip to the apartment, he not only feeds Kitty and waters the plants, but he lingers, strolling absently from room to room. In the bathroom, he swipes the bottle of pills and "looked at himself in the mirror and then closed his eyes and then looked again" as if taking his bearings. By the third day of the Stones' absence, Bill, ostensibly sick, has stayed home from work. Before long, he skulks back into the neighbors' world, making a leisurely survey of their belongings and finally settling himself on their bed.

He tried to remember when the Stones were due back, and then he wondered if they would ever return. He could not remember their faces or the way they talked and dressed. (11)

Again the mirror serves as a reference point as Bill tries on several of both Stones' outfits, including Harriet's black and white check skirt and burgundy blouse.

Arlene is similarly mesmerized by the apartment, returning from one unaccounted for hour there "with lint clinging to the back of her sweater, and the color . . . high in her cheeks." She's forgotten to feed Kitty or water the plants, but she has found "some pictures." "Maybe they won't come back," she says, echoing the thought of her husband. But when they excitedly return together to the apartment, Arlene realizes that she's left the Stones' key inside. The door is locked. Carver ends the story on a forbidding note: "They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced

themselves". (14) Surely, it is an ill wind, despite the couple's touching moment of closeness. Carver's characteristic short stabs of language convey panic, and the sort of detail of action that might be reported by an eyewitness.

"Neighbors," then, is about two rather hollow and thoroughly "average" people who encounter something in themselves they don't quite understand. They cast away from the terra firma of their mousy existence without charting a destination. The old life on one side of the hall seems more dissatisfying than ever, but the new life is on the other side of a locked door. In limbo, dissociated from both lives, the Millers have only each other. Carver has already shown us how very tenuous that link is. Arlene and Bill are a couple who exchange few words during dinner, and who watch TV after dinner. If they rarely disagree, it is more a matter of emotional anemia than connubial concord. When Bill returns from one of his forays into the Stones' apartment, he can't tell Arlene what he's been up to:

"What kept you?" Arlene said. She sat with her legs turned under her, watching television.

"Nothing. Playing with Kitty," he said, and went over to her and touched her breasts.

"Let's go to bed, honey," he said. (9)

The Millers' sex life catches fire, but only because of the fantasies they project for themselves in the apartment across the hall.

It is hardly gratuitous that Carver places a great number of his characters before mirrors and windows. Mirrors, we know, have the disconcerting capacity of making one a stranger to oneself. Bill Miller looks in the bathroom mirror in the Stones' apartment and sees only his own reflection there. He closes his eyes and opens them. Again, it is himself. But who is that? Wearing the Stones' clothes, Bill again seeks some kind of confirmation from the mirror, though Carver never tells us exactly what he sees. The symbol of the mirror is used similarly in the title story, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?". Ralph Wyman, who has just learned of his wife's infidelity two years before, attempts to escape the revelation on an odyssey through the seediest part of town. Drunk, he sees his face in a bar restroom mirror and touches it. Later, when he's returned home, he locks himself in the bathroom and makes faces in the mirror.

If the mirror is an emblem of Carverian dissociation, the window, appropriately, is a complementary symbol of voyeurism. Dressed in one of Harriet Stones' outfits, Bill Miller drifts to the living room window, pulls the curtain aside and peers out "for a long time." In doing so, he's looking at the world as a different person, Harriet Stone, might.

In one of Carver's wittiest stories, "The Idea," the voyeur motif is carried to an extreme. The first person narrator, a fiendishly prudish woman, sits in vigil each night by her kitchen window, waiting for the neighbors to enact their ritualized sexual fantasy.

Then I saw him. He opened the screen and walked out onto his back porch wearing a T-shirt and something like Bermuda shorts or a swimsuit. He looked around once and hopped off the porch into the shadows and began to move along the side of the house . . . He stopped in front of the lighted [bedroom] window and looked in. (15)

He is, of course, playing the peeping Tom as his wife ("the trash!") seductively takes off her clothes within. The vehemence of the narrator's righteous indignation—and her devotion to the spectacle—is Carver's wry comment on the close kinship of puritanism and prurience. The narrator allows that she and her husband, Vern, "get jumpy" after watching the libidinous couple, but so desiccated is their own sex life that the "appetite" of the evening becomes one for food, great quantities of it. Vern's interest in the neighbors is more wholesome: "Maybe he *has* something there . . . You don't know," he ventures, to his wife's chagrin. The narrator gets her comeuppance at the end of the story in the form of an infestation of ants. In her febrile mind, the ants become the immoral equivalent of the couple next door. Even after dispatching the modest column she had seen near the garbage can, she can't stop thinking about the little creatures: "Pretty soon I imagined them all over the house." As the images of the neighbors at their sexual play and the ants—"a steady stream of them, up one side of the can and down the other, coming and going"—fuse in her mind, she unwittingly re-enacts the scene next door, exposing her own nastiness:

I turned on every light in the house until I had the house blazing.
I kept spraying.
Finally I raised the shade in the kitchen and looked out . . .
"That trash," I said. "The idea!"
I used even worse language, things I can't repeat. (19)

*

The figure of the voyeur in literature has been around at least since the time of Homer. Odysseus, we recall, spies on Penelope and her suitors. In the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman, in poems like "The Sleepers" and "Song of Myself," used voyeurism as a way of resolving the paradox of the One and the Many, the individual and the other. Whitman's omniscient self plays at being invisibly present at the events described by the poet, at times even fantasizing merger with them: "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there." Thus, voyeurism becomes emblematic of an ultimate form of identification and empathy. But in our century a strong bond has been forged between voyeurism and alienation, disconnectedness rather than connectedness. The father-progenitor of the voyeur in modern literature may be Eliot's Tiresias, whose blind eyes turn the world into a nickelodeon peepshow. But more than the compassionate Tiresias, it is Eliot's "I" figure who serves as a prototype for

the disgusted voyeur of the “lost generation,” the moral witness who recoils from the corrupt and the specious. Nick Carraway has this reaction to the goings-on at his neighbor Gatsby’s, until he recognizes that not Gatsby but those who come to his parties to stare at him are the truly despicable. Jake Barnes is another ambivalent voyeur, finding a kind of agonized pleasure in watching Lady Brett’s entanglements with various macho lovers. A 1930s novel filled with images of voyeurism—“civilized” stag film parties, funeral watchers, crowds at Hollywood premieres—is *The Day of the Locust*. In his terrifying portraits of the people “who had come to California to die,” West pointed convincingly to the twin phenomena of alienation and voyeurism.

But we find an even more pointed use of voyeurism in contemporary fiction, in works like Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Fowles’ *The Collector*, both of which focus on alienated anti-heroes whose contempt takes an inward turn. Moreover, episodes of voyeurism figure prominently in works by such authors as Heller (*Catch 22*), Algren (*A Walk on the Wild Side*), Pynchon (*V.*), Barth (*The End of the Road*), Michaels (the story “Murderers,” in *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*), and Kerouac (*On the Road*). Kerouac’s *On the Road* provides a particularly good example of how voyeurism functions as a substitute for experience and involvement, and how closely it’s linked to the writer’s art. Sal Paradise, the writer-narrator, is a passively willing receptacle of Dean Moriarty’s manic vitality. He marvels at Dean’s genius for excitement and quietly lusts for his women. Finally, he is Boswell to Dean’s Johnson. (Dean, as well, despite his frantic racing after “IT,” the transcendental moment when experience and being fuse into one, has a penchant for voyeurism. He wants to watch Sal “work” his girlfriend, Marylou; and, after leaving Marylou in San Francisco, he follows her around secretly, peeping in her windows to certify that she’s a “whore.”)

The relationship between voyeurism and literature—the reading as well as writing of it—has yet to be fully explored. In the absence of a larger framework, we’ve found it useful to think of the voyeur as a thief, who possesses what he observes. Looking itself becomes experience, not merely vicarious experience. It is a transforming act, one which changes the character of that which is seen. This notion is operative, in different ways, both for the reader, whose understanding of the text is tied to his own way of perceiving, and for the writer, who takes his observations and shapes them as he wills. (Here it might be appropriate to note the lubricious character of voyeurism, specifically its connection with masturbation and sexual fantasy. We don’t mean to suggest that writers are deviants, but nonetheless direct the reader to Norman Podhoretz’s observation, in *Making It*, that among the sensations experienced by a writer as he sits down to create is sexual arousal).

In Carver’s works, the gulf between the seer and the seen—that is, between writer and subject—is very small indeed. His voice barely impinges upon the story being told, unlike the way a Barthelme’s or Pynchon’s might. Carver stays as close to the simple truth of his observations as a writer possibly can. He seems to have appropriated what he’s writing about and to have kept the

stolen thing closely intact out of fascination or respect. And so, as we read his stories, we feel we're accomplices in this faintly stealthy act of appropriation. Like the writer, we're voyeurs, peering into the disturbed lives of these unsuspecting characters. This is what is unique about Carver, his thorough but subtle manipulation of the metaphor of the voyeur at every level of his writing.

The voyeuristic quality of Carver's style comes through brilliantly in the story, "What's in Alaska?". Carl and Mary are visiting their neighbors, Jack and Helen, for an evening of pot smoking from Jack's new water pipe. Earlier we've learned that Mary has been offered a job in Alaska, a place Carl admits he's "always wanted to go to." But Carl's sense of well-being has been shaken by Mary's criticism of his new "soft beige-colored shoes that made his feet feel free and springy." Moreover, Carl has "watched" his wife embracing Jack in the kitchen. Let's examine a typical stretch of dialogue from this story:

"What did you read?" Jack said.

"What?" Helen said.

"You said you read something in the paper," Jack said.

Helen laughed. "I was just thinking about Alaska, and I remembered them finding a prehistoric man in a block of ice. Something reminded me."

"That wasn't in Alaska," Jack said.

"Maybe it wasn't, but it reminded me of it," Helen said.

"What *about* Alaska, you guys?" Jack said.

"There's nothing in Alaska," Carl said.

"He's on a bummer," Mary said.

"What'll you guys *do* in Alaska?" Jack said.

"There's nothing to do in Alaska," Carl said. He put his feet under the coffee table. Then he moved them out under the light once more. "Who wants a new pair of shoes?" Carl said.

"What's that noise?" Helen said.

They listened. Something scratched at the door.

"It sounds like Cindy," Jack said. "I'd better let her in."

"While you're up, get me a Popsicle," Helen said. She put her head back and laughed.

"I'll have another one too, honey," Mary said. "What did I say? I mean *Jack*," Mary said. "Excuse me. I thought I was talking to Carl."

"Popsicles all around," Jack said. "You want a Popsicle, Carl?"

"What?"

"You want an orange Popsicle?"

"An orange one," Carl said.

"Four Popsicles coming up," Jack said. (85-6)

There's a transcribed quality to this conversation (which in its entirety is twelve pages long), as if Carver had been sitting in the corner noting down each comment, pause and peal of laughter. He has it down exactly, the directionless quality, the silliness, the halting rhythm of talk among people

under the influence of marijuana. But there's more to this conversation than a technical prowess which conveys the illusion of eavesdropping. What seems to be casual talk, virtually empty of "communication," is really very deliberately and finely wrought. The typical out-of-synch effect of marijuana operates on a metaphorical level with Carl's own existential out-of-synch feelings. By tuning in obliquely to Carl's sullenness and the "bummer" he's on, by including the business about his shoes and the comments on Alaska and Mary's slip of the tongue (and embarrassed explanation), the conversation resonates with the meaning of the story itself. Carl, for instance, like the prehistoric man in Helen's newspaper story, is in a kind of emotional "block of ice." Even the seemingly innocuous episode of the Popsicles is endowed with meaning when the cat drags in a dead mouse and proceeds to lick it slowly "from head to tail" under the coffee table. The evening is bound to be a bummer for all. This is realistic writing of a different sort—a probe stuck beneath the skin of dissociation itself. Passivity is the strength of this language; little seems to be said, yet much is conveyed. If Carver's eye is that of the voyeur, his voice is that of dissociation.

At its most distinctive, Carver's language is unadorned, and, except for occasional bolts of metaphor, as laconic and unmannered as the outward lives of his characters. He flattens his prose to mirror the flatness of his characters' lives. The words in the stories are by and large those of the characters, we think, until we look a little closer: humor, irony and glimmers of the absurd affirm the writer's authority. Carver has perfected a style precisely calibrated with the emotional movement, or stasis, as the case may be, of his singularly ordinary characters. Nor, with few exceptions, does he choose to interpret the thoughts or actions of his subjects. The colloquial language, the first-person persona pieces, the dialogue's recorded quality, all suggest that the writer consciously has slipped into the lives of his characters and caught them at unguarded moments. Carver is the writer as voyeur, a chronicler of overheard conversations and secretly witnessed actions.

Thus it is that compared to the more "mannered" writers of the sixties and seventies—Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme, for example—Carver's style seems ingenuously simple, almost photo-realistic. Even the prose of Grace Paley and Leonard Michaels, both considered exemplars of lean, taut language, seems positively lush, almost Baroque in resonances and allusiveness, when held up to that of Carver. The temptation is to classify Carver as a throwback to an earlier era, say, of Anderson, Lardner and Hemingway. Although he derives from and to some extent reminds us of these earlier writers, there's a crucial difference. The sensibility here is clearly post-modern: beyond the flat quality of the Hemingway hero struggling to preserve an identity in the drear vastness of the wasteland, beyond the psychological frameworks of Anderson's stories, beyond the comic satire of Lardner. Carver's simple language is a disguise, as is Harold Pinter's, for the emotional violence lurking beneath neutral surfaces.

That Carver is designing in his use of images of voyeurism and dissociation is supremely evident in the story "Put Yourself in My Shoes." Here the central

character, who is both voyeuristic and disengaged, is a writer. The very title suggests the writer's dilemma: how can someone literally see something from another's point of view; how does the writer convey that the trick has been done?

Myers has quit his job with a textbook publishing firm (Carver once worked for one) to write full-time. "He was between stories and he felt despicable." As Myers drives to meet his wife Paula at a bar in town,

he looked at the people who hurried along the sidewalks, with shopping bags. He glanced at the gray sky, filled with flakes, and at the tall buildings with snow in the crevices and on the window ledges. He tried to see everything, save it for later. (132)

This passage is reminiscent of one in "Neighbors," describing the intensity with which Bill Miller peruses objects in the Stones' apartment:

He looked out the window, and then he moved slowly through each room, considering everything that fell under his gaze, carefully, one object at a time. He saw ashtrays, items of furniture, kitchen utensils, the clock. He saw everything. (11)

Although it's the Christmas season, Myers isn't part of the holiday bustle. Like his spiritual neighbor, Bill Miller, he's an observer, detached but curious; in short, another voyeur. (Unlike Miller, however, his detachment serves him creatively in his business as a writer.)

At the bar, Paula proposes they drop in on the Morgans, from whom they sublet a house the previous year, and whom they've never met. The Morgans are a stuffy, voluble academic couple. Myers, in contrast, is one of Carver's laconic sorts, and it's the diplomatic Paula who explains to the interested Morgans that her husband is a writer. When Edgar Morgan takes it upon himself to tell Myers stories which the writer "should be able to use," we begin to be aware of the multi-level irony on which this wry story is hinged. Not only is Myers coolly observing the Morgans, much in the way he made mental notes on the street scene, but Carver himself is meanwhile fashioning a story about a writer in the field. "Put Yourself in My Shoes" takes on the character of an aesthetic statement, one which puts forth the necessity of the writer's detachment, voyeurism, even cynicism.

It soon becomes clear that the Morgans' stories, intended to stimulate the writer, are merely amusing him to the point of rudeness. Inevitably, the Morgans leap on their former tenants, cataloguing with relish the Myers' transgressions during their tenancy. As the Myerses move toward the door, Morgan chuckles, tellingly accusing them of appropriating his two-volume set of *Jazz at the Philharmonic*. "I'd like this *writer* to tell me exactly what he knows of their whereabouts, Mr. Myers?" Morgan should be accusing Myers of taking with him something less concrete, but more valuable—the Morgans themselves. Isn't this, after all, the bread and butter of the writer, this cool treachery? Once safely in the car, Paula is eager to discuss the disastrous evening. But

Myers remains detached: "He did not answer. Her voice seemed to come to him from a great distance . . . He was silent and watched the road". (150) The final line of the story—as Carver's are wont—signifies much: "He was at the very end of a story." At the end, Carver and Myers merge.

If Carver the artist has cast himself in the role of the voyeur, he's played, as we've suggested earlier, an even more subtle trick on the reader. With all but the window pane removed, the reader too becomes a voyeur, a peeping Tom comfortably out of danger of getting caught. (Isn't this one of the appeals of all fiction?) But Carver has laid a trap for us too, for, along with the characters, we may experience the benignly familiar suddenly becoming strange and even frightening. In the title story, the pattern on a table cloth, a woman tossing her hair, and a man about to play a song on a jukebox suddenly loom as terrifying. An out-of-work salesman in "They're Not Your Husband" overhears two men making lewd remarks about his wife's expansive bottom, which then becomes his obsession and his undoing. In "Are You a Doctor?" a wrong number touches off a chain of events which threatens to undermine the complacency of a faithful, middle-aged husband. The effect is somewhat similar to that of reading Kafka. But what Kafka projects through the lens of a nightmarish reality, Carver, at his most distinctive, forces us to see through the most conventional and habitual experiences of everyday life. It is the familiar, the seemingly "known," which is the true mask of the terrifying.

Nowhere is this message more explicit than in "The Father," a two-page story which could be read as Carver's homage to Kafka. A family, consisting of grandmother, mother, and three little girls, clusters around a crib watching and playing with the new baby, a boy. The father, meanwhile, sits in the kitchen, his back to them, in the aloof style of a man bored with women-talk. The five females are debating who the baby resembles in the fatuous way that such things are discussed. One of the girls declares, "*I know! I know! . . . He looks like Daddy!*" But if the baby looks like Daddy, asks another, then who does Daddy look like? The answer, terrifying to the children, is "Daddy doesn't look like *anybody!*" At this point, all turn to look at the father sitting in the kitchen. His reaction, described in the last sentence, reveals that even daddies hover close to the existential abyss: "He had turned around in his chair and his face was white and without expression." His is the face of fear; it is drained of expression and identity. The comfortable fellow known as Daddy has been erased. The story is mannered; we can't help but think of Kafka and other writers of the real unreal. But Carver also tells us something about his own obsession with the theme of dissociation, disconnection from the familiar in the most common surroundings. And if this story doesn't make that theme new for us in the way it is made new in Carver's more representative stories, it at least points a way to an understanding of precisely why we feel the ground shift beneath us in reading Carver.

In the more representative—i.e., less consciously stylized—stories, Carver is even more unsettling with his dissection of the mundane. Like most of us, his characters aren't heroes. They don't teach us how to behave nobly or honorably

or even intelligently in moments of crisis. Like the voyeurs they are or resemble, Carver's characters shy away from dramatic confrontation, they avoid existential tests of character. These people are completely removed from Mailer's or Hemingway's preoccupation with masculine assertion. Although there are showdowns in these stories, no one really wants them to occur. Betraying wives are threatened with bodily harm, but rarely do their husbands actually make good on their threats. (An exception to this occurs in the title story, but even that scene, a flashback, becomes the prelude to erotic reconciliation) In "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts," where Carver waxes uncharacteristically sentimental, Evan Hamilton has a brief wrestling match with another neighborhood father who challenges his son's honesty. But even as fists begin to fly, Hamilton "couldn't believe it was happening." Leo, the deceived husband in "What Is it?" waits up all night for his errant wife, but backs off when she invites him to slug her. He's content, finally, to undress her as she sleeps and roll her, naked, under the covers. We see another example of capitulation in the climax of "Sixty Acres," in which the main character, Lee Waite, confronts two smug boys who have been poaching ducks on his land, an inheritance from his Indian father. He puts the boys off the land, but does nothing more, and feels about his actions that "something crucial had happened, a failure." Carver's third-person narrator comments: "But nothing had happened."

Nothing happens because in the main Carver's dissociated characters prefer it that way. Living in a world of unarticulated longing, a world verging on silence, they may even, like the couples in "Neighbors" and "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?", consider themselves "happy." But such happiness is fragile, Carver tells us. Something or someone always happens along to disturb the uneasy equilibrium, forcing a sudden confrontation with a hidden or suppressed part of the self. The disturbance itself acts as a trigger to larger revelations of self-alienation.

In the story "Are You a Doctor?", for instance, Clara Holt, a divorcee with a sick child, accidentally dials the unlisted number of Arnold Breit, a middle-aged man who is not a doctor. At first Arnold resists the temptation to become involved with the tenacious Clara and only reluctantly surrenders his name over the phone. But the temptation to dress himself in an alien persona triumphs over middle-aged inertia. Arnold accepts Clara's invitation to her apartment, a model of suburban-village tackiness, but finds neither the woman nor the setting romantic. After a fumbled embrace, Arnold retreats to the familiarity of his own apartment and life. But something has changed. At Clara Holt's instigation, Arnold has entered into a kind of voyeur's fantasy life, adopted a new, strange and exciting identity (Carver's narrator, of course, reveals how much at variance the fantasy is from the reality). The change is conveyed cunningly at the end of the story. The phone rings and Arnold, believing it may be Clara calling again, his heart pounding with anticipation, picks it up: "'Arnold. Arnold Breit speaking,' he said." The use of his name here signifies much, for when Arnold answers the phone at the beginning of

the story, he is expecting the caller to be his wife and automatically responds, " 'Hello, dear.' " This time it is his wife calling. She's surprised, as well she might be:

"Arnold? My, aren't we formal tonight!" his wife said, her voice strong, teasing.

"I've been calling since nine. Out living it up, Arnold?"

He remained silent and considered her voice.

"Are you there, Arnold?" she said. "You don't sound like yourself."

(38)

Arnold's brief but strange encounter with Clara Holt has been transforming. The "new" Arnold finds he has nothing to say to his wife, whose voice he "considers" as if it were curiously alien. In turn, Arnold no longer sounds like himself. Receiver in hand, he's vouchsafed a different vision of himself. The "awakening" is ironic, of course.

It is in moments like the conclusion of "Are You a Doctor?" that Carver's characters realize, with varying degrees of understanding, their aloneness, their dissociation even from their families. And it's appropriate that many of these "awakenings" occur in bed, during bouts of insomnia when the spouse lies soundly asleep, unknowing. Where there should be greatest intimacy, there is, instead, a dark and final sense of isolation.

"What's in Alaska?", for example, ends with a scene in which Mary has fallen asleep, leaving Carl awake with his new doubts. These uncertainties are made manifest in a Jamesian fashion, with Carl looking into the dark hallway and seeing, he thinks, "a pair of small eyes" (which reminds us of the neighbors' cat who so blissfully licked the mouse like a Popsicle). "The Ducks," a story about a vaguely discontented working class couple, has a strikingly similar ending. After a half-hearted attempt at love-making, "she" falls asleep and "he" remains fitfully awake. He wanders to a window—it's raining outside—and back to bed, where he tries to awaken his wife. The final lines of the story are: " 'Wake up,' he whispered. 'I hear something outside' ". (182) Though less forbidding, the "something" bears a close resemblance to Carl's two little eyes in the dark hallway. In "The Student's Wife," Nan spends a sleepless night crying, praying, pacing and reading magazines, as her husband, the student, snores in the bedroom. The existential terror of the night culminates, ironically, with the breaking dawn:

She had seen few sunrises in her life and those when she was little. She knew that none of them had been like this. Not in pictures she had seen nor in any book she had read had she learned a sunrise was so terrible as this. (129)

Carver creates similar scenes for his characters in "Fat" and "What Is It?" In these stories, wakefulness represents a particularly ineluctable sort of awakening to the tenuousness of human connections. The characters have an onlooker's view of their own loneliness.

After first reading Carver, one familiar with both authors is likely to be struck by the resemblances in subject matter and style between Carver and Grace Paley. Like Carver, Paley is a writer who's interested in unassuming, ordinary people. Although not her most typical story, Paley's "The Burdened Man" seems a tale that Carver would have relished telling in his own inimitable fashion. Both writers experiment with persona pieces, though the kinds of self-revealing language they use to portray their first-person narrators are necessarily different: her people are mostly New Yorkers and his the less insouciant dwellers of the Western suburbs and countryside. They also share a particularly contemporary fondness for the darker shades of humor and irony, and a more traditional delight in common language and idiom. They share an important thematic goal too: to give voice to the feelings and desires, expressed and unexpressed, of those who, for one reason or another, cannot tell their own stories.

But a re-reading of both Paley and Carver reveals one crucial difference. Carver, like many of his post-modern contemporaries—Harold Pinter and Leonard Michaels, for example—writes at once comically and bleakly. Most of his stories have static or unhappy endings. (There are exceptions, like the title story, still to be discussed.) Paley, on the other hand, refuses to allow the bleakness of the modern condition to eclipse life's often ironic but nevertheless real joys and delights. Her characters have ingenuity; they are creative, capable of transforming adversity into another victory for love, friendship, family. They experience pain, frustration, and anger, but they rise from the depths to win out over the alienating elements of urban life. And they seem to have one quality that Carver's people almost uniformly lack—the courage to be themselves.

Carver's characters, on the bottom, often (not always) sink lower. In "Collectors," one of Carver's strangest and most compelling stories, a man—the narrator—is shown at the lowest ebb of his life. He has no job, no family, no interests in anything but is waiting for a letter from "up north" about a job. "I lay on the sofa and listened to the rain. Now and then I'd lift up and look through the curtain for the mailman". (100) Like Carver's other window images, this one suggests a kind of lonely voyeurism. Into this state of suspended animation pops a very pushy and talkative vacuum cleaner salesman who "collects" from the narrator his remaining dregs of self, much as the miraculous vacuum cleaner the salesman demonstrates "collects" the "bits and pieces" of a person's body:

"You'll be surprised to see what can collect in a mattress over the months, over the years. Every day, every night of our lives, we're leaving little

bits of ourselves, flakes of this and that, behind. Where do they go, these bits and pieces of ourselves? Right through the sheets and into the mattresses, *that's* where! Pillows, too. It's all the same."

At the end, the salesman also pockets ("collects") a letter, dropped through the mail slot, which may or may not be addressed to the narrator, an act the narrator is helpless to prevent.

The vacuum cleaner salesman introduces himself as Aubrey Bell, a name suggesting the kind of noisy intrusiveness Carver's laconic characters desperately avoid. Not only does Bell poke his machine into the corners and crevices of the narrator's rooms, but he continually challenges the narrator to give his name. The narrator, unlike Arnold Breit, refuses to surrender this last vestige of self to the curious salesman, who may be making off with it anyway at the end. Although none quite as strange as the vacuum cleaner salesman, there are many other Bell-like characters in Carver's stories. Clara Holt, for instance, brings the ringing of the telephone and subsequently much greater "noise" into Arnold Breit's life. In many stories, it's the sound of the wife's voice that ripples the quiet surface of the marriage. In "What's in Alaska?", Mary starts Carl on his "bummer" first by criticizing his new shoes, then by telling him that he's "on a bummer tonight." Carl's reply is one that speaks for all of Carver's fragmented egos: "All I'm saying is I don't know why you said that. If I wasn't on a bummer before you said it, it's enough when you say it to put me on one". (81)

Carl's complaint also reminds us of the title and title story of Carver's collection, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" This title, as suggested earlier, indicates a desire for detachment, and the sort of clenched politeness that masks the impulse to shout, "Shut up!" In the midst of pressuring his wife, Marian, to tell the full tale of her infidelity, Ralph Wyman feels the temptation to withdraw from revelation, to "leave it at that." He has a womb-like vision of such a withdrawal: "He thought fleetingly that he would be someplace else tonight doing something else, that it would be silent somewhere if he had not married". (234) Ralph finally leaves the house and goes to skid row in an unsuccessful attempt to escape the noise of his wife's confession. When he returns home at dawn, he locks himself in the bathroom. Marian rattles the door knob and begs to be let in. Ralph pleads in return, "Will you please be quiet, please?"

The title story is Carver's longest and most complex. It's placed last in the collection. It's also one of only three or four stories which end other than bleakly. Carver seems to endow his more complex, introspective "heroes," Ralph Wyman in this story, Al in "Jerry and Molly and Sam" (a serio-comic piece worthy of more comment than this reference in passing), with at least the possibility of brighter futures. After a night of hellish revelation, in which Ralph confirms the suspicions he's long held of his wife's unfaithfulness, he returns to the marital bed. It's a different kind of bedroom scene from those discussed earlier. Marian soothes away the pain of Ralph's self-revelation. And he responds in kind, not by forgiving her, for it isn't Ralph's place to forgive.

Rather, he discovers an ability to grow and change, and the strength to discard the cherished but unrealistic vision of Marian and himself, and to accept his own as well as Marian's sensual nature. Much of this is conveyed in the imagistic description, at the end of the story, of release and sensual movement:

He tensed at her fingers, and then he let go a little. Her hand moved over his hip and over his stomach and she was pressing her body over his now and moving over him and back and forth over him. He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him. (249)

This story is a different sort of fish, more writerly than most of Carver's, and richer in background information and authorial guidance. At the same time, we find here a sort of confluence of Carverian themes and images: the theme of marital crisis (which over half the twenty-two stories in the collection involve), the encounter with the dissociated self, and the kind of alienation that makes of one an observer. There are also marvelous scenes, including the one of the locked bathroom, in which Carver brings his distinctively plain style (and voyeur's intensity) to a story in the tradition of Cheever and Updike.

This is also, it seems, a very Jamesian story. Ralph Wyman is Carver's most introspective character. From college days he has pursued self-knowledge, and at one turn in the road had the feeling he was "on the brink of some kind of huge discovery about himself," a discovery which "never came". (225) This is the period of "lowest ebb" for Ralph, when he becomes the fraternity drunk and acquires the sobriquet, "Jackson," after the name of the bartender at a college hangout. But Ralph gives up his dissolute ways, decides to become a teacher, joins in college activities and politics, and marries Marian Ross, "a handsomely pale and slender girl who took a seat beside him in a Chaucer class."

Ralph is deceived. He has paved over, not rid himself of "Jackson," the Dionysian side of him which continues to haunt his conscious mind. Carver, from the beginning, shows us the naivete of Ralph's pursuit of innocence and simplicity. On his honeymoon in Mexico, Ralph had been "secretly appalled by the squalor and open lust he saw and was anxious to return to the safety of California". (227) But on the honeymoon Ralph has an even more disturbing "vision," one which "had nothing to do with Mexico." It is, significantly, a voyeur's vision of his wife, Marian,

... leaning motionless on her arms over the ironwork balustrade of their rented *casita* as Ralph came up the dusty road below. Her hair was long and hung down in front of her shoulders, and she was looking away from him, staring at something in the distance. She wore a white blouse with a bright red scarf at her throat, and he could see her breasts pushing against the white cloth. He had a bottle of dark, unlabeled wine under his arm,

and the whole incident put Ralph in mind of something from a film, an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted but he could not. (227)

What Ralph has perceived here so intensely is the threateningly mysterious sensuality of his own sensible-seeming wife (in many of Carver's stories, the sexual assertiveness of the woman represents a threat to the delicate male ego). Marian (or Woman, perhaps) inherits, from Ralph, those very traits of "squalor and open lust" he cannot face in himself, but also cannot fully suppress. As life becomes calmer, and as Ralph begins to feel "enormously happy," he becomes possessed by the need to replay the imagined scenes of Marian's abasement at a suburban party: "... Ralph thought about it more and more. Increasingly, ghastly images would be projected on his eyes, certain unthinkable particularities". (228)

The voyeurism in this story is tinged with narcissism. It is almost as if Ralph were standing in front of a mirror which was reflecting not his but Marian's image, acting out "certain unthinkable particularities" for Ralph's benefit. Marian's long tale of the unfaithful wife, her "confession," which is delivered in the most elaborate, vividly recalled detail, suggests that she's conscious of the game they're playing, and has need of it too. The double nature of voyeurism, which hints at the intimate bond between "voyeur" and "victim," is conveyed in this conjunction of "window" and "voyeur" images:

She went into the living room and turned on the lamp and bent to pick up a magazine from the floor. He watched her hips under the plaid woolen skirt. She moved in front of the window and stood looking out at the streetlight. She smoothed her palm down over her skirt, then began tucking in her blouse. He wondered if she wondered if he were watching her. (230)

The revelation of Marian's unfaithfulness is self-revelation for Ralph. Even Ralph's accusation, "Christ! . . . But you've always been that way, Marian!", reveals more about him than about his wife. The self-discovery is underscored in the next line the narrator delivers: "And he knew at once that he had uttered a new and profound truth". (233) Then follows Ralph's desperate all-night walk on the wild side of Eureka, the small northern California city where the Wymans live. He gets drunk, loses his money in a poker game, is mugged, and confronts ghastly nighttown images of dissociation and sensual corruption. In the course of his wanderings, he becomes "suddenly aware that he had come a long way that evening, a long way in his life. *Jackson*, he thought. He could be *Jackson*". (243)

At dawn, he takes his battered soul and body home. His young daughter asks innocently, "What did you do to your face, Daddy?" But the image of self-alienation isn't complete until Ralph locks himself in the bathroom:

He looked at himself in the mirror a long time. He made faces at himself. He tried many expressions. Then he gave it up. He turned away from the mirror . . . (248)

For Ralph this is a mirror which reflects hope, not despair. Ralph may not have “found himself” yet, but at least he’s rid of the smug, “enormously happy” Ralph who couldn’t face confusion and contradiction except by dissociating himself from them. Moreover, the “new” faceless Ralph is protean: he can accept the “many expressions” life gives us to wear. He can even “give up” and “turn away” from the mirror. Thus he is prepared for the final revelation of the concluding bed scene, and perhaps the one genuine epiphany in this collection of Carver’s stories, the moment in which Ralph “turned and turned . . . marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him.”

Carver has “turned” too. He’s come full circle in this last story to show us how self-revelation can point a way back to understanding and intimacy. Yet even in this rare hopeful tale, the relationship between Kafkaean dissociation and voyeurism remains strong. The character is an unwilling witness of something “taboo,” an act which stretches his perceptions. The voyeuristic glimpse leads to a rupture in the seemingly calm surface of life, and a disaffection with the self. It is an awakening to the possible terrors of existence. What changes ultimately will come about Carver is careful not to explain, for his stories finally are as open-ended as life itself. But he does tell us that life continually presents us with small but important tests, and that little can be taken for granted. “I learned a good deal about this and that from all my snooping” in John Gardner’s office, Carver recalls, revealing more than he realizes about the sources of his art, as well as his success as a writer of fiction. He tells us this more explicitly in his story “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” in which we see the writer’s observations transformed in his mind and art into revelations of larger experience. In this case, the larger experience is that of the writer, the artist. He’s also made us aware, if we weren’t before, of the close kinship between reading and voyeurism. For these things alone, he deserves the accolades he’s already earned and will continue to earn. But he’s done one thing more. Carver the artist and Carver the voyeur have conspired to convince us that we’re reading about real people in real situations. His accuracy hits home; we put ourselves in the shoes of his characters, and we find, often, that the fit is alarmingly close. Reading Raymond Carver’s stories is like peering into the windows of life through very powerful binoculars.

NOTES

1 Cassandra Phillips interviewed Raymond Carver in the Eureka, California newspaper, *The Times-Standard*, July 24, 1977, pp. 1-2.

2 All quotations and page numbers are from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: The Stories of Raymond Carver* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976). Carver has recently published a second collection of short stories, in a small press edition, *Furious Seasons* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1977). He is also the author of three books of poetry, *Near Klamath*, *Winter Insomnia*, and *At Night the Salmon Move*.